



EUROPEAN IDENTITY AND ITS IMPORTANCE TO THE EU

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In the past three years a specific question became an important issue in the political process although it has been discussed for some decades now: Is there a European identity? And if there's no such identity: Can it be created? Can we even speak of a European people? Due to the United Kingdom (UK) leaving the European Union (EU) these very basic, though important questions were set once again on the agenda of politics, media and the civil society. Moreover there are nationalist parties gaining strength in almost every European state and with the case of Hungary and Poland there are even two states governed by nationalist leaders (Jacobs, 2018). Hence, we can assume that right now a possible European identity is under heavy fire from nationalist movements and parties all over Europe. The upcoming elections to the European Parliament in May will be decisive regarding the project of European integration and identity.

How to Build Identity?

Before dwelling on the ideas of a European identity, there is another question which has to be answered foremost: How is identity constructed in the first place? First of all, identities are man-made, therefore they're not self-evident nor objective. Identity is largely influenced by social, cultural and geo-political environment and isn't fixed; on the contrary, identities develop and change over time as well as from place to place (Michael, 1996). Before objections are raised it has to be stated that this doesn't deny the influence of climate, physical environment, bloodline, genes and so forth, but rather that these objective facts are only some elements in the development of a collective identity. Collective identities can be understood as largely defined by culture and society rather than nature and are accordingly under everlasting construction and development (Delanty, 1995).

With new nationalist parties rising and gaining strength in various countries and their view of collective identity being a static characteristic, which has to be strongly rejected as on the contrary: collective identities are volatile (Smith, 2013). Furthermore identities are based on perceptions of how we see ourselves and of what we think we're not. This means that the definition of collectives as nations, states and peoples rely on the constructed, self-defined identification of their own characteristics, but also in differentiation to the ones perceived as the *others*. In scientific literature this process is called *othering* and results from the fact that it is easier to identify certain characteristics in an opposite group than in one's own (Macdonald, 1993).

In addition, a European people needs a collective identity as it is a constituent part of a social group. In order to be part of a social group, people have to identify with each other in social terms (Hewitt and Shulman, 2011). As of now, speaking about a European *people* would presumably overestimate the current status of Europe and the EU. Nevertheless, this stresses the importance of identity for a social group, in this special case: the Europeans.

Hence, the existence of a European identity can't be taken for granted if it'd existed. Conflicts, which don't necessarily need to be violent but can result out of different views on certain topics, as for example after the migration crisis in 2015 and the British referendum on Brexit 2016, do affect the integrity of collective identities (Jacobs, 2018). These conflicts and the election of anti-European parties into national parliaments and governments indicates that at this point of time, we hardly can speak of a collective identity of a European people.

Several identity conflicts are apparent in the UK between English nationalists, Scottish and Irish, which manifested themselves during the Brexit negotiations (Niedermeier and Ridder, 2017). Correspondingly there is a similar conflict in Spain between Spanish and regional nationalists that put a strain on the nation and its identity (Álvarez-Junco, 2014). These examples show that, albeit the conflicts in nations between different collective identities, there still is a loyalty towards the state and a bigger national identity can be successfully established. Transferred to the European level it means that even if currently a European identity is under attack from nationalists, it can be developed successfully over time. Furthermore, a collective identity is vital to the EU as it is the primary source for legitimisation of a political community (Bruter, 2005). More damage to the idea of a European identity would be a dramatic setback for the EU and might challenge the legitimacy of the EU even more by nationalists and other EU-hostile groups. The idea of legitimacy through identity is based on Rousseau's contract theory: the state can rule legitimately as a result of the citizen's identification with the state and therefore the state is able to act on a perceived general will (Ottmann, 2018). If more governments and their people regard EU-policies as illegitimate and want to follow the British example, then the EU will have to face a real crisis with a presumably horrendous aftermath.

What Does it Take to be European?

When deliberating about ideas of a European identity and a European people, one specific question comes to mind: What does it take to be European? As already mentioned it isn't enough to just be born on European ground, living here or maybe even have a "European look" but to identify oneself with a broad idea of a European collective.

Moscovici (2015), currently serving as the European Commissioner for Economic and Financial Affairs, Taxation and Customs, expressed his ideas against the background of the 2015 refugee crisis in a blog post under the title "To be European is to be humanist". He hereby reminds the reader that the EU was established because of several wars between European countries and to arrange peace on the continent through integration into a peace system (Troitino, 2013). At the end of the blog post, Moscovici (2015) sums up his ideas: "Europe is a place of freedom, a community of values, and a democratic ideal. To be European is to be humanitarian". On this basis solidarity between the membership states is an essential value as Moscovici has explained, because otherwise problems as the migration crisis can't be solved by the states on their own. Moreover, the states need to work closely together in order to tackle global problems, as the migration crisis won't be settled in short time. Besides the migration crisis, climate change is another topic that the European states have to work on because the causes can't be resolved by single governments. This feeling of being mutually affected by the same problem and tackling it with other states might translate into the people's feeling of a common European identity. In order to do so, the governments need to find common ground on specific policies and present themselves as a Union. Ultimately this could result in a perceived general will the EU could act on, like Rousseau described as necessity to ensure legitimate rule by a government (Ottmann, 2018).

But when looking at recent events in Europe, the idea of solidarity between the states isn't necessarily accepted by all member states. Especially Poland and Hungary are about to abolish important democratic institutions and develop a "illiberal state". This puts the idea of what is (a) European at risk and therefore the EU has already made arrangements to keep the Polish and Hungarian governments in control (Kingsley, 2018). This might provoke criticism that the EU is interfering in a national issue of a democratically elected government. But in the end, this is necessary in order to ensure democracy in Europe. Therefore, the most important values in order to be a European are the democratic values: liberty, equality and justice. Furthermore, solidarity is another value that constitutes a European, as without solidarity the EU wouldn't be possible.

Vestager (2016), serving as European Commissioner for Competition since 2014, declared on a conference on European future what it is to be European: "Respect for diversity, and respect for the individual, are more than just political values in Europe. They also define who we are as Europeans". Implicitly this means that being European doesn't mean to get rid of the national identity but to also feel part of something bigger than just the national state. Getting rid of national identities and the differences between nations would result in conflicts like in the 20th century and that is why diversity is a constituent part of the European identity.

Finally it is important to state that a European identity doesn't mean that national identities need to be abolished. In the end national identities constitute the EU and upon this basis a European identity is built.

European Integration and Identity:

Building identity is intertwined with the process of European integration, which can be explained through several theories, the most important ones being federalism, functionalism, cooperation and neo-functionalism (Troitino, 2013). In order to try to explain how European identity can be built, I will focus on the analytic continuation of the neo-functionalist concept.

For functionalist theorists it was already clear that there can be multiple loyalties, thus, identification with Europe won't necessarily mean a decrease in loyalty towards the nation. This hypothesis can also be underlined by the Eurobarometer data, which suggests that there are a lot of people who first identify with their nation but nevertheless also with the EU (Risse, 2005). Moreover, as statistical analysis shows, identity is a stronger predictor for support for European integration than economic rationale (Niedermayer and Sinnott, 1998).

Risse (2005) describes this phenomenon in two different models, the first one being the "Russian Matruska doll", which implies a hierarchy between the different identities: firstly I am a Swabian and, therefore, being Swabian is embedded in my German identity, which again is embedded in my identification as European.

The second concept he calls a "marble cake" model in which the different identities can't be separated but influence each other. The "marble cake" model implies that the process of building a European identity can't be separated from the national identity. In addition, this even indicates that European identity can be perceived differently in various states according to the relative national identity. I already outlined the social constructivist theory above, which aligns very well with this model, as identities are always a volatile entity, which can differ from place to place, time to time, nation to nation and so forth (Michael, 1996).

How to Build European Identity?

With some theories and models explained and outlining the basic ideas what it means to be European, now the question is: How to actually build a European identity without risking identity conflicts? It is therefore vital to not disregard national identity, but to better understand it and identify similarities as well as differences

in identity. Accordingly, the process of socialisation and education matter the most in establishing a European identity. Starting in school, the emphasis should not only be on sciences but also on humanities with a focus on national, as well as European history. Furthermore, it is important to teach the basics of the EU in school in order to enable the students to understand the political processes on a transnational level and overcome the feeling of distance towards the EU. Projects like Erasmus should be promoted and interchanges during high school facilitated, so that pupils and students get to know different European cultures and thus establish a common European identity. A European identity is crucial to prevent the European Union from drifting apart and in order to further the integration towards a federal United States of Europe.

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